

A MICRO-LAB IN FAMILY ENRICHMENT

by

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My interest in a Micro-Lab in Family Enrichment has grown out of two facets of my personal life. One happy and one unhappy. The happy one was an experience I had in a micro-lab in sensory awareness that resulted in a new realization of the power and joy of encounter. From this a vision unsued of the potential of this sort of experience thing for marriage enrichment. The unhappy one was the personal experience of the total and absolute breakdown of all meaningful communication in my own family. This resulted in separation and ultimately in divorce. With this came the stark realization that no skill or effort could effectually redeem or reverse a situation as bad as this.

Therefore my convictions are two with regard to this project. One, there are some marriages that are beyond hope of recovery and there is no human effort that can alter their collapse...a divine miracle might. Two, the vast majority of marriages can be and should be strengthened. The good ones can be made even better. The poor or feltering ones can be given a positive boost toward greater health and vitality. There are some simple communications skills that can help in this. Indeed, a human relationship as complex as marriage will need more and must have more than one single communication skill. It is offered here only as a helper, not a cure-all.

The experience of human loneliness is without doubt the most greivous of all human agonies. This is nowhere more troublesome than in a family relationship. The writer of the Psalms said in Psalm 68:6: "God setteth the solitary in families..." Fortunately for most, this is their refuge from loneliness and isolation. Unfortunately for others it only deepens theirs. This is the paradox, in the very institution designed to end isolation and loneliness we may

find it the most burdensome and painfully present.

The only real answer lies in the experience of openness and reality between persons in the family relationship. This anonymous poem speaks well to this point.

PLEASE HEAR WHAT I'M NOT SAYING

Don't be fooled by me,
Don't be fooled by the face I wear.
For I wear a mask, I wear a thousand masks,
Masks that I'm afraid to take off, and none of them are me.

Pretending is an art that's second nature with me.
But, don't be fooled--for God's sake, don't be fooled.
I give you the impression that I am secure,
That all is sunny and unruffled with me, within as
well as without,
That confidence is my name and coolness my game,
That the water is calm and I am in command and that
I need no one,
But, don't believe me, PLEASE.

My surface may seem smooth, but my surface is my mask,
My ever-varying and ever-concealing mask.
Beneath lies no smugness, no complacence.
Beneath dwells the real me, in confusion, in fear,
in aloneness.

But I hide this. I don't want anyone to know it.
I panic at the thought of my weakness and fear of being
exposed.
That's why I frantically create masks to hide behind,
A nonchalant, sophisticated facade to help me pretend,
To shield me from the glance that knows.

But such a glance is precisely my salvation, my only
salvation.
And I know it.
That is, if it's followed by acceptance, if it's
followed by love.

It's the only thing that can liberate me from myself,
From my own self-built prison walls, from the barriers
That I so painstakingly erect.
It's the only thing that will assure me of what I can't
assure myself,
That I'm really worth something.

But I don't tell you this. I don't dare. I'm afraid
to.
I'm afraid your glance will not be followed by acceptance
and love.

I'm afraid you'll think less of me, that you will
laugh,
And your laugh would kill me.
I'm afraid that deep down I'm nothing, that I'm no
good.
And that you'll see this and reject me.

So I play my game, my desperate pretending game,
With a facade of assurance without and a trembling
child within.
And so begins the parade of masks,
The glittering but empty parade of masks, and my life
becomes a front.

I idly chatter to you in the suave tones of surface
talk,
I tell you everything that is really nothing,
And nothing of what's everything, or what's crying
within me.

So, when I'm going through my routine, do not be fool-
ed by what I'm saying;
Please listen carefully and try to hear what I'm NOT
saying.
What I'd like to be able to say, what for survival
I need to say,
But what I can't say. I dislike hiding.

Honestly, I dislike the superficial game I'm playing,
The superficial, phony game.
I'd like to be genuine and spontaneous and me,
But you've got to help me.
You've got to hold out your hand--
Even when that's the least thing I seem to want,
or need.

Only you can wipe away from eyes the blank stare of
the breathing dead.

Only you can call me into aliveness.

Each time you're kind, gentle, encouraging,
Each time you try to understand because you really care,
My heart begins to grow wings,
Very small wings, very feeble wings, but wings.

With your sensitivity and your sympathy and your
power of understanding
You can breathe life into me.
I want you to know that.

I want you to know how important you are to me--
How you can be a creator of the person that is me--
If you choose to--

Please choose to.

You alone can break down the wall behind which I
tremble.

You alone can remove the mask.

You alone can release me from the shadowy world of
panic and uncertainty,
From my lonely prison.

So, do not pass me by.

Please do not pass me by.

It will not be easy for you--

A long conviction or worthlessness builds strong walls.

The nearer you approach to me, the blinder I may strike
back.

It's irrational, but, despite what the books say
about men,

I am irrational.

I fight against the very thing I cry out for.

But I am told that love is stronger than strong walls.

And in this lies my hope, my only hope.

Please try to beat down those walls with firm hands,
But with gentle hands, for a child is sensitive.

Who am I, you may wonder?

I am someone you know very well.

I am every man you meet and I am every woman you meet.

It may come as something of shock to realize that that
"every man you meet and every woman you meet" can also be the
members of your own family. Your own spouse, your own children.

The only real solution to this paradoxical emprise is
in the very experience of self revelation and self disclosure.
In our own unfolding and self exposure do we find our deepest
acceptance and warmest refuge. Sidney M. Jourard says it
this way: "Researches I have conducted show that a person
will permit himself to be known when he believes his audience
is a man of goodwill. Self-disclosure follows an attitude
of love and trust. If I love someone, not only do I strive to

know him; I also display my love by letting him know me. At the same time, by so doing, I permit him to love me."¹

It was precisely at this point that I was struck with the practicality and reasonableness of an article which appeared in The Times Magazine. It was a feature article written by Jo Ann Wendt, entitled, "What Couples Therapy Can (and Can't) Do For Your Marriage." Here she states: "Both Ron Aldridge and Ken Rosner trace all specific marital problems to one major underlying problem---a break down in communication between husband and wife".² Therefore, any tool or trick, any skill or scheme, any means or madness that can get the lines of communication open and functioning again will be just one more building block toward strengthening the structure of the home and family.

The project which I have undertaken is designed to be a small and simple adjunctive component in the monumental task of preventive maintenance in the family relationship. The particular tool is an exercise designed by L. Richard Lessor and outline in his recent manual entitled: From Married to Merried. He called the exercise, "Filling in the Spaces". It appears in its total on page 6 as it was given to the trial families who participated in this project.

I carried out my project by requesting three families to undertake the exercises on their own and write their own verbatim of the experience. The families were selected at random, more or less. Actually it was determined more by willingness to cooperate than any other single factor. The verbatims appear without editing and with a short family sketch at the beginning of each one.

1. Jourard, S.M., The Transparent Self. New York, D. Van Nostrand Co., 1971. p.5.

2. Wendt, Jo Ann, "What Couples Therapy Can (and Can't) Do for Your Marriage", The Times Magazine, March 12, 1975, p.7.

FILLING IN THE SPACES

Often there is much left unsaid between persons.

We tend to be cold--distant--isolated--insulated.

We live in couples and families for years, never knowing that those living with us were at times Angry, Hurt, Loving or Nostalgic about certain words, times, places, actions or events. To fill in the spaces of the Communication Gap, sit down with your partner and

SHARE-TIME

in the following ways:

After spending a few moments getting in touch with yourself and your partner, allow yourself to become aware that you are here with another member of your family,

living

breathing

sharing

HERE-AND-NOW...

Then, one partner completes the sentence:

"I feel most relaxed with you when we _____."

Discuss your feelings about the completed sentence and come to some agreement about what action, if any, should follow.

When the discussion is completed, the other partner finishes the same sentence and discussion follows.

Then, go on to the next sentences, using the same procedure:

"The time I look forward to most is when _____."

"I feel we were closest together when we _____."

"I am happiest with you when _____."

"My daydream about you is _____."

When you have finished all five sentences, discuss the whole experience...focus on what you have discovered about yourself, about the other person and

ABOUT YOUR RELATIONSHIP.

FAMILY # One

This chaplain and his wife have been married for twelve years. They were married immediately following his graduation from seminary. One year later their first and only child was born. One more year later they came into the Army.

There's been a reasonably good and happy marriage. They have passed through several adjustment periods with no more than the common amount of stress. They both feel that they communicate well and have a very good relationship. They are open and positive in their attitude and were quite willing to enter into this exercise and report their findings.

After the suggested "warm up" the couple entered directly into the exercises in the following way.

Husband: "I feel most relaxed with you when we have put the boy down at night and we have some quiet time, and the TV's turned off."

Wife: "I guess I didn't know that the TV bothered you that much. You watch it too."

H: "I know I do...but I still feel more relaxed when it's turned off. And I know that _____'s in his room. That's just a relaxed time. And I like it."

W. "I really just don't think about the TV. I don't listen or watch it in the day time...I guess I just tune it out. Maybe we should turn it off more at night."

H. "Well, I wasn't attacking the TV...I just meant that it was more relaxed here when it was turned off."

W. "Maybe we should just turn it off more. I mean we could really spend more time talking, or listening to music, or maybe we could all read together...separately...or something."

H. "Well I do that anyway...read, I mean..."

W. "Yes, I'm aware of that."

H. "Ouch!"

W. "Now I didn't mean that..."

H. "Well, I heard you anyway...and this is something we have needed to look at anyway."

W. "Should we go on?..."

H. "I'm satisfied with this point...let's try the next sentence."

Husband: The time I look forward to most is the time when we will retire.

Wife: That seems so strange to me...that's a long time in the future.

H: I know, but it is still the time I look forward to...and getting out of USACHCS.

W: Well, yes, I look forward to that too.

Husband: I feel we were closest together when we at the hospital with _____ when he was eight years old and we thought we might lose him.

Wife: Yes, that was a close time. It might have been when we were closest to one another. I think we have had a pretty good marriage all along. We talk very freely and openly and you listen most of the time.

H: I listen all of the time...I just don't always let you know that I'm listening. Maybe I should more...let you know that I'm listening, that is. Like when I say: "I hear you saying..."

W: O God, not that again...please!

Wife: Let me try the next one. I am happiest with you when ...when...you carry out the garbage.

Husband: Aw, come on, be serious. That's not when you're the happiest. That's just when you are least mad at me.

W: Well, it may not be the happiest...but it's close. You know what that says to me?? It says, you care. It says that you are thinking about me and that the way the house looks and smells is as much your concern as mine. When I see you taking out the garbage and the trash then I say to myself..."He really does want to be partners." I know it's a little thing, but I really do feel that way sometimes.

H: That's hard for me to believe, but I guess it may be more important than I thought. You want to try the next one too?

W: Sure...My daydream about you is...that you'll come home in the middle of the afternoon and make love to me...right in the living room.

H: With _____ watching I suppose. Hey, that's not a bad idea. I mean come home in the middle of the afternoon...not with _____ watching. I day dream about that too. That's more like a

sexual fantasy. You are something else. We did that sort of thing when we first got married. I guess we ought to still do it. Hmmm.....

W: I think we have a pretty good relationship...even if you still don't like my mother. (That's an inhouse joke.)

H: I agree. I've learned a couple of things here though. That business about the garbage I just forget about. I'll try to remember if it says that much to you.

W: I think I learned something about TV too. Let's work at that a little more. A little less noise, and a little more talk.

H: And a lot more loving in the middle of the afternoon.

FAMILY # Two

This couple are in their late thirties. They have three small children. They have had a real roller coaster of a marriage. They have had several trial separations. They are willing enough to work at their marriage but they seem to have some very deep seated things that keep causing problems.

The children are very well disciplined. The outward appearance of the family is one of moonlight and roses. But they must really have some wild fights sometimes.

It was only with great reluctance that I could persuade them to even try these exercises. They have been messaged and counseled and pushed and shoved enough. They did try...and the results are as follows.

Husband: I feel most relaxed with you when we are on a vacation.

Wife: You feel most relaxed with me when you are getting your way...and nobody is giving you a hard time...including me.

H: Well, isn't that a vacation?

W: It doesn't have to be...Oh yeah...I see what you mean. Well I guess being out from under pressure is like a vacation. I know when I feel most relaxed with you.

H: When is that?

W: It's right after you get a real good OER. After that for days you are wonderful to be with. You are less demanding on me and on the kids. You can be a real peach when you want to be. Your problem is that you don't want to be often enough.

H: Now come on...I am doing better...you will have to admit I really am doing better. Just a little bit??

W: Yes you are...dear...you are doing better...for Richard's report you are doing better...a little bit. The only thing about it is...you're better is about equal to most people's bastard...Aw...I'm sorry...I was just kidding...(she laughed).

Husband: Well so much for that. The time I look forward to most is when I go on TDY.

Wife: You really are in a bitch of a mood aren't you. You just can't wait to get away can you. Imagine a whole year at USACHCS and you didn't get one freebie on Uncle Sugar. I wish I could get TDY.

H: You know, I don't know who will be reading this...but maybe we could try just a little bit...

W: Well, our names won't be on it, will they?

H: No, but if you keep on they will guess.

W: Aw shit...this whole thing is silly and artificial and you can tell old Richard to shove it...sorry about that...

H: Yeah...Old Richard...sorry 'bout that.

(Lessor's book and this verbatim were returned...with the suggestion that I could provide my own vasaline.)

FAMILY 3 Three

This couple is the oldest of the three. This is a second marriage for both of them. They are not only mature in years they are, I feel, very mature in their insights and sensitivities.

They both have children who are in their teens and older. Her two younger children are living with them. They are both girls, ages 14 and 16. The family relationship as a whole is warm and supportive. Everybody talks to everybody and everybody listens to everybody. Sometimes they all scream and shout, but they all hear and talk to one another.

The couple were able after a very happy and eventful day to have a time of rest before they sat down to do these exercises. The results were more inspirational than therapeutic. I believe that they did not edit their comments. I really believe that what is recorded is what was indeed said.

As a matter of record. This was the only couple to actually do the exercises as they were outlined. Perhaps they felt the least threatened by them. In any case they did them the way they were designed to be done. Maybe this proves that these are really any good anyway except in a marriage that is doing pretty good on its own.

Husband: Would you like to start off?

Wife: Sure. I feel most relaxed with you when we just being together. Just the two of us. After everybody else is off doing their thing...just the two of us. I think that's still next.

H: I like that too. It is still relaxing to be with you. I can get pretty uptight...but you can cut me loose. I really like that.

W: When do you feel the most relaxed?

H: I guess I feel most relaxed after we've had intercourse and it's been good for the both of us. I just float off after that. The whole world just gets up and goes off by itself to take care of its own troubles for a while. I am at peace.

W: I know that you have said that before. It just doesn't effect me like that...but I'm glad that it does for you. That's when I'd like to jump up and run around the house a couple of dozen times...but I don't mind your being relaxed. I guess that makes me happy that it does that to you.

H: How do you feel about talking about this is this way?

W: I don't mind. I think what we have is pretty good and I really wouldn't mind who looked in on us. We've had to

work pretty hard and wait pretty long to get what we've got and I wouldn't mind at all sharing it with some people that I know who don't have anything nearly so good...

H: Wait...that's too long a sentence...I'm not sure I got it all... But, what I did get...I agree with. I feel very good about us too.

W: If we were to do this all over again I might say that I feel most relaxed with you when we are talking about feeling most relaxed. Let's try the next one.

H: The time I look forward to most is when...we'll have the free time to do all the projects that we have planned. That and our just plain growing old together.

W: I look forward to anything that we can do together. We really do have a good partnership and most anything that we undertake together is a rewarding experience. I've been looking forward to this. Every sinse you told me about being asked to do it I've thought it would be an enjoyable experience.

H: Sometimes I live too much in the future and not enough in the "here and now". You have taught me a lot about being a "now" kind of person...and I'm not talking about Women's Lib. I mean "now" in the sense of present time...not tomorrow...or yesterday...but right now. You are right this is nice.

W: Well, not all thinking about the future is bad. Jesus said you ought not to be anxious about tomorrow, but he also said that if you wanted to build a tower or fight a war you ought to do a little thinking ahead or you might get embarrassed. Didn't he say something like that?

H: That's a loose translation, but it will do for Government work as they say. Yeah...that's really what he was saying.

W: Then when you say something about us growing old together and having some projects that are going to keep us going when that time comes I don't think that negates being a "now" kind of person. I think that is being sort of the way Jesus wants us to be and look ahead and not looking back. Anyway...I like to hear you say that you want to grow old with me...I want to grow old with you...that way maybe neither of us will even notice...Hmmm.....

(At this point we both decided that we need to get up and take a pee break...so we did...)

H: I feel we were closest together when we have a really big fight and then make up.

W: I don't agree with that, but then we sort of differ on that point. I wish we never had a fight. It still scares me half silly when things really get to going. I don't know whether it's that I feel that they may not stop, or if it is that it seems like there ought to be some other way to settle our differences.

H: Well, you may be right. There may some other way...but until somebody invents it...I still say that I feel closest to you when it's all over. Not while it's going on, when it's over.

W: Don't you feel close to me when we are praying?

H: Nope. Sometimes I don't even feel close to God, and He's the one I'm supposed to be talking to. When you are praying I sometimes get sleepy.

W: Do you know that you are awful...but I really do love you.

H: Yeah...I know both of those things.

W: When are you the happiest with me?

H: That's supposed to be an uncompleted sentence, not a question. I am the happiest with you...when I come home and you have baked a pumpkin pie and fixed a really great dinner...and you still feel up to meeting me at the front door with a kiss.

W: I'm happiest with you when you notice...and you kiss me back.

H: OK...we're even. Do I ever not notice?

W: Sometimes I don't think you do. You sometimes kiss me at the door at night like I was the wall tree or something. That's when I know to keep a low profile for a little while. You will eventually come back to the here and now...but right then you are still in the there and when...and I know better than to try to pull you out of it. You usually come around on your own. No...that's not true...you don't usually come around...you always come around...it just takes longer sometimes.

H: My day dream about you is that you will still love me when I am ninety-five.

W: My day dream about us is that we'll love one another when we are ninety-five.

H: I think this has been a pretty refreshing kind of thing. I heard you say some things tonight that I don't think I've

been listening to very carefully. I think I listen...I
call myself listening...but maybe I don't always.

W: Well it has been easy to get you attention tonight. I
think I must have been piling up more stuff than I was aware
of. It feels better to get it out. I really feel good about
us...I always have...and I do now. I love you.

H: I love you.

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